

JULY 24, 1986

Two trains a week run from Beijing to Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia. The rail schedules have to maintain a wide margin as it takes 15 hours to make the trip one way. Chinese trains don't run fast enough to make a head-on collision dangerous. Nevertheless, no trainman that I've ever heard of wants to be bumping his equipment around, chipping the paint off his cow catcher hitting other engines. My calculations showed the distance to be about 415 miles. I haven't bothered to figure the average speed as I don't think that anything an American visitor were to turn into the Dept. of Transportation would raise the speed limit.

The trains offer four kinds of service: soft berth, hard berth, soft seat, and hare seat. Our delegation had the best accommodations, which meant the "soft berth" class. I had a top bunk with three roommates, cabin No. 4, located some 36 meters from a full vented diesel smoke stack.

Far into the night, I longed for a softer pair of pants for a pillow and a full course of the injections that feedlots give lambs that arrive on the top decks of diesel trucks. I'm proud to say that at no time was I close to being bucked out of my top berth. However, I did lash my right arm to the safety rail with a luggage strap I carried along for emergencies.

As I write this report, we've been off the train about three hours and are already having our first meeting with the Mongolians. I have a big white notebook in front of me. The interpreter is listing all of the pertinent material on Inner Mongolia. I already have enough information on population rates, altitudes above sea level, and livestock numbers to compile an atlas. I dare not show my lack of interest in the proceedings, as on the front wall there are pictures of Stalin, Lenin, Marx, and a leader I don't recognize. As stern and disapproving as those hombres appear, I don't want to get caught doodling or doing my newspaper work. I still have a scar on the back of my neck from a ruler that a third grade teacher used for enforcement purposes for that very crime:

What I'm interested in, they won't talk about. On the way over to the hotel from the train station, I was lucky enough to meet a member of their legislature who spoke English. One thing he told me was that Inner Mongolia had 300,000 camels and that camel hair was more valuable than wool.

Of course I got all excited about the camels. Humpy cattle do pretty good in the Shortgrass Country every way except economically. He said these camels were the double humpers that can thrive wherever there's an old salty browse called Russian Pea brush. He claimed that camels were strong draft animals and gave rich milk and were good to eat once they got too old to work or milk.

At lunch he was careful to see that I had a piece of fried camel hump. It tasted a lot like elk meat. My taste wasn't up to par. I was still exhaling diesel fumes so strong that I was recycling them on the back draw. Tonight I'll see if they have some left over camel hump to be sure how it tastes. I don't want to be one of those writers who says that everything different is just like fried chicken.

Another good thing about camel ranching is that most of the hair either falls off or can be pulled off before it hits the ground. I imagine that you have to be mighty careful

shearing a camel as they are bound to be awful ticklish between their front toes and their humps. I'd think a shearer would sure have to watch his blades around those particular spots.

Before they start hollering for me to hurry up, I'm going to have to go out to a Research Institute. I haven't seen a church steeple since we left Seattle. I sure would like to find a nice quiet chapel to rest for a spell.